Making Way for Elephants

What is the issue?

- Elephants making news for dying on rail tracks is on the rise in recent days.
- The incidents remind of the duty of protecting the forests where elephants thrive.

How is the casualty scenario?

- **Tracks** - More than 100 elephants had died on the tracks during 2001-10.
- The frequency and number of train kills have, in fact, been rising.
- Across India, average annual casualties jumped from 9 during 2000-09 to 17 over the next 7 years.
- **Others** - Trains are actually a minor killer.
- Poisoning, poaching, and electrocution together kill more than four times as many elephants.
- During 2009-16, more than 500 elephants died this way as against 120 killed on the tracks.

What is the threat?

- Only the richest and widest of forests can support elephants.
- Elephants migrate long distances along 'corridors' that are usually marked by similar vegetation.
- Once-contiguous elephant habitats are now fragmented by mines, rail lines and human settlements.
- This largely interrupts their transit zones and lead to clashes and casualties.
- Elephants thus pay a heavy price as one of the worst victims of India's development.

What are the limitations with protection?

- India's 668 **Protected (forest) Areas** cover less than 5% of the country's area.
- India's 32 **elephant reserves** (ERs) are spread over 65,000 sq km.
- But only less than 30% of this area is legally protected forests.
- Centre's **Elephant Task Force** recommended declaring the entire ER area as ecologically sensitive under the Environment Protection Act.
- This would make another 46,000 sq km out of bounds for miners and developers.
- The Task Force also recommended setting up of 10 **elephant landscapes** around the 32 ERs.
- This would require **judicious land** use in another 45,000 sq km.
- But there is reluctance to treat the Protected Areas as sacrosanct.
- Attempts to make these stretches as **no-go zones** are seen as an impediment to growth by many.

What are the other concerns?

- National Highways run through 40 of India's 88 identified elephant corridors.
- Putting **curbs** on speed or night traffic along the ever-expanding linear network makes little economic sense.
- **Speed restrictions** are feasible only in short, singular stretches. E.g.

  i. 11km near Berhampore in Odisha
  ii. 8-km segment through Jharkhand's Palamu
  iii. 4-km in the Palghat Gap in the Western Ghats that connects Kerala's Palakkad and Tamil Nadu's Coimbatore

- However, speed restriction is not an option on **steep gradients**.
- E.g. in Assam's Karbi Anglong, where to climb, trains must accelerate
- In North Bengal, the night speed limit once applied to a total of around 17 km.
- It was applied for a **series of short stretches** of 1-3 km each, in an 80-km segment between Siliguri and Alipurduar.
- But since 1-3 km does not cover even the **braking distance**, trains ran slowly over the entire segment.
- Slowing down trains for hours at a stretch would disrupt **rail traffic** over a large part of the network.

What could be done?

- **Speed restrictions** - This could work better when guided by real-time inputs on elephant movements.
- A protocol put in place in Rajaji National Park (Uttarakhand) helped avert elephant casualties for many years.
- Followed rigorously, it can be replicated in short stretches elsewhere.
- **Realignment** - There are places where a track, or road, cuts across several wildlife corridors over a longer stretch.
- The solution for these junctions could be realignment.
- Where realignment is not possible, tracks have to be elevated with underpasses for elephants.
- **Railways** - Not all forest routes can be realigned or elevated overnight.
- The Railways must thus prioritise, and balance efficiency and safety while planning projects or expanding existing ones.
- Expertise and experience available to find site-specific, science-based solutions for key corridors should be made use of.
- **Political will** - The test lies in the will to implement those remedies irrespective of the cost.
- It will take a lot more to secure the elephant's fragmented and shrinking home, such as giving up on sizeable coal reserves.
- **Provisions** - Elephants mostly travel for water.
- Periodic de-siltation of their watering holes will keep them in their areas.
- **Besides**, WTI (Wildlife Trust of India) is testing an automated solar-powered device, **EleTrack**.
- This can detect large animals near the tracks and issue a loud, flashing warning for train drivers.

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Source: Indian Express

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